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Audience of the Holy Father with the Roman Curia on the occasion of the exchange of Christmas wishes

This morning, in the Hall of Blessing of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the cardinals and superiors of the Roman Curia for the exchange of Christmas wishes.

During the audience, the Pope delivered the following address to the Roman Curia:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

Before all else, I would like to thank Cardinal Re for his words, but also for his energy: a ninety-year old with all this energy. Keep it up! Thank you.

The mystery of Christmas fills our hearts with awe – a key word – at an unexpected message: God has come, God is here in our midst, and his light has forever pierced the darkness of the world. We need to hear and accept this message anew, especially in these days tragically marked by the violence of war, by the momentous risks posed by climate change, and by poverty, suffering, hunger – there is hunger in the world! – and all the grave problems of the present time. It is comforting to discover that even in those painful situations, and all the other problems of our frail human family, God makes himself present in this crib, the manger where today he chooses to be born and to bring the Father's love to all. This he does in God's own "style": with closeness, compassion, tenderness.

Dear friends, we need to listen to the message of the God who comes to us; we need to discern the signs of his presence and to accept his Word by walking in his footsteps. *Listen, discern, journey*: these three verbs can describe our faith journey and the service that we offer here in the Curia. I would like to share these words with you by considering some of the main figures in the Christmas story.

First, there is Mary, who reminds us *to listen*. The young woman of Nazareth, who holds in her arms the one who came to embrace the whole world, is the Virgin who listened intently to the message of the angel and opened her heart to God's plan. She reminds us of the first and greatest of the commandments: "Hear, O Israel" (*Deut* 6:4), because more important than any precept is our need to enter into a relationship with God by accepting the gift of the love that he comes to bring us. Listening, in the Bible, refers to hearing not only with the ears, but also with the heart and one's entire life. Saint Benedict begins his Rule with the words: "Listen attentively, my son" (*Prologue*, 1). Listening with the heart entails much more than simply hearing a message or exchanging information; it involves an interior openness that can intuit the desires and needs of others, a relationship that urges us to abandon the patterns and prejudices that at times lead us to pigeonhole those around us. Listening is always the beginning of a journey. The Lord asks his people to have this kind of heartfelt listening, to enter into a relationship with him, who is the living God.

That is how the Virgin Mary listens. She receives the message of the angel with complete openness, and consequently does not conceal her questioning and inner turmoil. Rather, she opens her heart to the God who chose her and she accepts his plan. Dialogue and obedience. Mary realizes that she has received a priceless gift and on her knees, that is, with humility and awe, she continues to listen. There is no better way to listen than "on our knees", since this means not thinking, in our pride, that we already know or have understood what others are about to tell us, but are instead open to the mystery of the other, ready to receive with humility what he or she wants to tell us. Let us not forget that only in one case is it legitimate to look down on someone: only to help that person up. That is the only case where it is legitimate to look down on someone.

Sometimes, even when speaking among ourselves, we risk being like ravenous wolves: we can devour the other person's words, without really listening to them, and then shape them to fit our own ideas and judgements. Really listening to another person, however, requires interior quiet and making room for silence between what we hear and what we say. It is not a game of ping-pong. First, we listen, then, in silence, we appropriate what we have heard, reflect on it, interpret it, and only then are we ready to offer a response. Prayer teaches us how to do this, for it expands the heart, overturns our egocentrism, shows us how to listen to others and awakens in us the quiet of contemplation. Let us learn contemplation in our prayer, as we kneel before the Lord, not only with our legs but also with our hearts! Even in our work in the Curia, "we need to implore God's grace daily, asking him to open our cold hearts and shake up our lukewarm and superficial existence... We need to recover a contemplative spirit which can help us to realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life. There is nothing more precious which we can give to others" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 264).

Brothers and sisters, in the Curia too, we need to learn the art of listening. Even more important than our daily tasks and responsibilities, or even the positions we hold, is our need to appreciate the value of relationships, to keep them simple and straightforward, marked by an evangelical spirit, above all by our ability to listen to one another. With the heart and on our knees. Let us increasingly listen to each other, free of prejudices, with openness and sincerity. With our heart and on our knees. Let us listen to one another, trying hard to understand what our brother or sister is saying, to grasp his or her needs and in some way his or her own life, which lies hidden behind those words, and without judging. As Saint Ignatius wisely advises: "Let it be presupposed that every good Christian is to be more ready to save his neighbour's proposition than to condemn it. If he cannot save it, let him inquire how he means it; and if he means it badly, let him correct him with charity. If that is not enough, let him seek all the suitable means to bring him to mean it well, and save himself" (*Spiritual Exercises*, 22). It takes effort to really understand another person. Let me repeat: listening is different from simply hearing. Walking the streets of our cities, we can hear many voices and many noises, yet we generally do not listen to them, internalize them or let them stay with us. It is one thing just to hear; it is another thing to listen, which also means to "welcome within."

Listening to one another helps us to adopt *discernment* as a method for our activity. Here we can think of John the Baptist. First, Our Lady, who listens; now John, who discerns. We are all familiar with the greatness of this prophet, the austerity and forcefulness of his preaching. Yet when Jesus arrives and begins his ministry, John experiences a dramatic crisis of faith; he had proclaimed the imminent coming of the Lord as that of a mighty God, who would at last judge sinners by casting every tree that bears no fruit into the fire and burning the chaff with an unquenchable fire (cf. *Mt* 3:10-12). This image of the Messiah shatters before Jesus' gestures, words

and “style”, before the compassion and mercy he shows towards all. Then the Baptist realizes that he needs to discern, so as to receive fresh eyes. As the Gospel tells us, “when John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (*Mt 11:2-3*). In a word, Jesus was not what people had expected, and even the Precursor had to be converted to the newness of the Kingdom. He had to have the humility and courage needed to discern.

Discernment, then, is important for us all. As an art of the spiritual life, it can strip us of the illusion of omniscience, from the danger of thinking that it is enough simply to apply rules, from the temptation to carry on, even in the life of the Curia, by simply repeating what we have always done. And in this way failing to realize that the Mystery of God is always beyond us and that the lives of people and the world around us are, and will always remain, superior to ideas and theories. Life is always superior to ideas. We need, then, to practise spiritual discernment, to seek God’s will, to be sensitive to the deeper stirrings of our hearts, and then to assess our possibilities and the decisions that we need to take. As Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini once wrote: “Discernment is quite different from the meticulous exactitude of those who live in legalistic conformity or with pretensions to perfectionism. It is a burst of love that distinguishes between good and better, between what is helpful in itself and what is helpful here and now, between what may be good in general and what needs to be done now”. He then went on to say: “Failure to strive to discern what is best often makes pastoral life monotonous and repetitive: religious acts are multiplied, traditional gestures are repeated, without clearly seeing their meaning” (*Il Vangelo di Maria*, Milan 2008, 21). Discernment ought to help us, even in the work of the Curia, to be docile to the Holy Spirit, to choose procedures and make decisions based not on worldly criteria, or simply by applying rules, but in accordance with the Gospel.

Listening: Mary. Discernment: the Baptist. And now our third word: *journey*. Here we naturally think of the Magi. They remind us of the importance of journeying. The joy of the Gospel, once it is truly embraced, leads to discipleship, to leaving ourselves behind and setting out towards an encounter with the Lord and with the fullness of life. Leaving ourselves behind: this is an aspect of our spiritual life that we always need to examine. The Christian faith – let us remember – is not meant to confirm our sense of security, to let us settle into comfortable religious certitudes, and to offer us quick answers to life’s complex problems. On the contrary, whenever God calls us, he sends us on a journey, as he did with Abraham, with Moses, with the prophets and with all the Lord’s disciples. He sends us on a journey, draws us out of our comfort zones, our complacency about what we have already done, and in this way he sets us free; he changes us and he enlightens the eyes of our heart to make us understand the great hope to which he has called us (cf. *Eph 1:18*). In the words of Michel de Certeau, “Mystics are those who cannot halt on the journey... Desire creates an excess. It exceeds; it passes by; it presses on. It makes us fare forward, to another place” (*Fabula Mistica. XVI-XVII secolo*, Milan 2008, 353).

In our service here in the Curia too, it is important to keep faring forward, to keep searching and growing in our understanding of the truth, overcoming the temptation to stand still and never leave the “labyrinth” of our fears. Fear, rigidity and monotony make for an immobility that has the apparent advantage of not creating problems – “*stay put, don’t move*” – but lead us to wander aimlessly within our labyrinths, to the detriment of the service we are called to offer the Church and the whole world. Let us remain vigilant against rigid ideological positions that often, under the guise of good intentions, separate us from reality and prevent us from moving forward. We are called, instead, to set out and journey, like the Magi, following the Light that always desires to lead us on, at times along unexplored paths and new roads. Let us not forget that the journey of the Magi, and every journey in the Bible, always begins “from above,” with a call of the Lord, with a sign from heaven, or because God himself becomes a guide to illumine the path of his children. So whenever the service we offer risks becoming dull, enclosed in the “labyrinth” of rigidity or mediocrity, whenever we find ourselves entangled in the web of bureaucracy and content “just to get by,” let us always remember to look up, to start afresh from God, to be enlightened by his word and to find the courage needed to start anew. Let us not forget that the only way to escape from a labyrinth is to see things “from above.”

It takes courage to journey, to fare forward. It is a matter of love. It takes courage to love. I think of something I once heard from a zealous priest, which can also help us in our work in the Curia. He said that it is not easy to rekindle the embers under the ashes of the Church. Today we strive to kindle passion in those who have long since lost it. Sixty years after the Council, we are still debating the division between “progressives” and “conservatives,” but that is not the difference: the real, central difference is between lovers and those who have

lost that initial passion. That is the difference. Only those who love can fare forward.

Brothers and sisters, thank you for your work and your dedication. In that work, may we cultivate the hearing of the heart and serve the Lord by learning to accept and *listen* to one another. Let us practise *discernment*, in order to be a Church that strives to interpret the signs of history in the light of the Gospel, one that seeks solutions that communicate the Father's love. And let us always keep *journeying* forward, with humility and wonder, lest we fall into the presumption of thinking we have arrived, lest the desire for God fade from our hearts. Thank you, especially for all the work that you do in silence. Let us not forget: listening, discerning, journeying. Mary, John the Baptist and the Magi.

May the Lord Jesus, the Word Incarnate, grant us the grace to rejoice in humble and generous service. Please, I encourage you, let us never lose our sense of humour, which is healthy!

To you and to your loved ones I offer my prayerful good wishes for a blessed Christmas. And I ask you, please, to say a prayer for me before the manger. Thank you very much.
